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“THE FUTURE IN AMERICA.”*

BY JOSEPH S. AUERBACH.

Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci,
Lectorem delectando pariterque monendo.
Hic meret aera liber Sociis; hic et mare transit
Et longum noto scriptori prorogat ævum.

HORACE.

MR. WELLS has done important literary work, appreciation of which must increase as time goes on; but he has done nothing which so clearly entitles him to a prominent place among the distinguished men of letters as his “Future in America,” issued from the press of Harper & Brothers. Whether we consider its substance or its form, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to name another author equally well equipped to produce such a book. His stay in this country was short, but the two chapters written before he reached America—one in his study in England, and one on the ocean—indicate how complete was his preparation for a correct interpretation of our problems and so-called progress, with which, although he had been free of actual and interested contact, he had, nevertheless, been intimately identified in their intellectual and economic and spiritual import. Accordingly, we have a work of rare merit and absorbing interest, though the charm and effect of a graceful, vigorous style are distinctly marred by the “isn’ts” and “don’ts” and “haven’ts” and other similarly irritating colloquialisms appearing so persistently on many pages.

To turn from the discussion by the demagogue of the problems that are confronting us, to this book, is like coming from a foul tunnel into the exhilarating atmosphere of a bracing day.

Its views may not minister to our vanity, but it ought to have

* “The Future in America.” By H. G. Wells.

a wide influence with us as a people. There would be no doubt about its having such influence, if we did not so much exaggerate the importance of the views of the so-called practical man—whose judgment is rarely based on contemplation, but is often warped by interest or excessive activity—that we are disposed to neglect the best counsel of the worthy men of letters. For the world of ideas and the world of activities lie close together, and, sooner or later, there will be some just appraisal of our legacy from great authors—not alone from the standpoint of mere literary excellence, but of the immediate relation of their writings to a correct disposition of social and economic ills. Then we shall appreciate infinitely more than we do to-day the value of what these men of letters have done for the well-being of the world, and shall realize that while many others have been seeking, like economic quacks, to deal with the symptoms of a disease, it is they who have given wise but often rejected counsel for its complete eradication. And men like Emerson, and Arnold, and now Wells—for this book entitles him to an intellectual kinship with them in the expression of great truths about us—have more knowledge of our true condition than we are inclined even to conjecture.

Fortunately, the "Future in America" has appeared at the period of our disillusionment, when what Mr. Wells terms our egotistical interest in our own past is at an end. Now, if ever, we should be prepared to receive such a book without irritation and perhaps with a distinct welcome.

The "Spectator," in a comment full of crudities and contradictions, has reviewed the book somewhat unfavorably; but, apparently, the "Spectator" has volunteered to see to it that nothing from an English source critical of American institutions shall pass unrebuked. It mistakes, however, the present temper of the American mind, which is no longer solicitous for adulation, but is seeking and insisting upon true enlightenment and guidance as it gropes its way through its labyrinth of doubts and difficulties. And to apply the term "caricature," as does the "Spectator," to the splendid picture Mr. Wells presents, with its extended horizons and true perspective, its fine spiritual coloring, and with only such detail as serves to emphasize its proportions, evinces for us a lack of that frankness which is the true test of friendship, while from the intellectual standpoint the

characterization is a close approach to unpardonable nonsense. Yet the "Spectator," with an inconsistency of which it seems quite unconscious, admits that Mr. Wells has produced a "remarkable book," and that "no bird's-eye view of a nation that we know has a keener imaginative insight." Fortunately, however, full justice is done to Mr. Wells in England by Mr. Sydney Brooks's scholarly and appreciative review of the book.

Aside from a startling clairvoyance, so to speak, which enables Mr. Wells to see our problems in their relative importance and to point out the peculiarities of our existing and threatening difficulties, one of the chief attractions of his book is the absence of anything like an attempt to dogmatize about us; and he often doubts the accuracy of his own impressions, leaving to us the answer to many of the questions he has asked, though the answer is often but too obvious. His playful fancy, characteristic of so much of his other writings, does not desert him, nor is there wanting a certain grim humor centring largely about our "spike-crowned" Statue of Liberty, that, dwarfed by the sky-scraping commercial structures forming its background, suggests to him something of the regard in which hitherto in our national life we have held liberty in comparison with trade and commerce.

What he believes to be our failure to live close to high ideals in business does not escape his notice; but then he considers this a condition in no way peculiar to us, and he is of the opinion that business, for the most part, is without high ideals; and his views generally as to the natural effect of excessive devotion to the pursuit of trade will not weary the reader with platitudes. Even for the "much-reviled" Mr. Rockefeller, who, in so much of the newspaper discussion of the day, is put down as the incarnation of all that is evil and unprincipled in business methods, he confesses to a "sneaking liking," recognizing in him almost an unconscious product of a glut of opportunity; and he thinks if the product had not been Mr. Rockefeller, it would have been some one else suspiciously like him. From his standpoint, Mr. Rockefeller is not the criminal; but the thing criminal is the economic and industrial cut-throat game, which—with the little children of the factory and the sweat-shop among its pitiable victims—he considers we have made in part our national occupation.

He regards as comparatively of trivial and negligible importance in our national life "things like the Chicago scandals, the

insurance scandals and all the manifest crudities of the American spectacle." He knows well enough that as a matter of self-preservation men cannot permit such things to have any abiding-place in a community. Long ago Fisher Ames uttered this truth:

"If there could be a resurrection at the foot of the gallows; if the victims of public justice could live again, unite and form themselves into a society, they would find themselves constrained, however loath, to adopt the very principles of that justice by which they suffered, as the fundamental law of their State."

The insistence upon honesty in such cases is not a virtue, it is merely a policy. Penal Codes do not furnish the foundation on which a great nation's life can be reared.

This, too, should be added, that much in our method of announcing these scandals is itself scandalous. Some wrongdoing there doubtless has been; yet, as Mr. Wells says, "graft is no American specialty." It appears everywhere in the world in spots and places, but the moral sense of the men of this country who are making its true and enduring history is sound and wholesome. And in default of the whipping-post, there should be the appropriate social or business or political outlawry for those who, in high or low places, are to our lasting shame blazoning forth to the world the untruthful and repulsive assertion that a great body of American citizens are afflicted with a loathsome disease—the contagious itch for other people's property.

Quite apart from such things he sees our real dangers. He looks for disastrous consequences from the un wisdom of inviting to our shores, without any attempt at discrimination, an immigration which does not impress him "as an influx of energetic people, of economically independent settlers, . . . but in the main as an importation of laborers increasingly alien to the native tradition"; and he adds some valuable suggestions for the avoidance of this menace. Dr. Darlington, the health officer of New York City, in a most thoughtful article in a late issue of *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, says something quite similar as to the quality and character of our present immigration. Nor can we ask for any more impressive comment upon our perfunctory insistence that the suffrage will elevate these people than Mr. Wells's words: "The immigrants are being given votes, I know; but that does not free them, it only enslaves the country. The negroes were given votes."

Then, with keen insight, he points out how, in association with the momentous consequences of this immigration, we are summoned to deal with the pathetic and ominous problem presented by our great and increasing colored population, that he terms the "Tragedy of Color." He cannot be said to have any specific remedy for this ill, but he does not think there is much admixture of the true American spirit in our treatment of it. He excuses himself, but many will think he needs no excuse for idealizing the dark, submissive figure of the negro in this spectacle of America, who seems to him to "sit waiting—and waiting with a marvellous and simple-minded patience—for finer understandings and a nobler time." And if the negro problem does not appeal to our sense of justice, it ought at least to teach us the prudence of not adding to it the further menace of fresh and unrestricted importations of an inferior population, which he is confident cannot be assimilated into our citizenship. Our hurry and disposition to "step lively" furnish him with evidence of our disregard of much which must be a part of a nation's creed and practice, if it would realize its ideals. As typical of our contradictory extremes, he found Chicago squalid and joined to its idols of acquisition, "smoky, vast and undisciplined"; but in even such an environment there were not wanting evidences of a moral awakening that in all communities of the world is groping its way upward; while Boston, with all its intellectual virtues, impressed him as "cultured, but uneventful," and without leadership or even an appropriate interest in the struggle to solve the great problems of to-day. At such a time as the present he has no tolerance with the "immense effect of finality" of Boston. He was distinctly disappointed in not finding what he looked for in Washington, a "clearing-house of thought."

In the world at large he recognizes some national conditions not radically different from ours; and though he sees them magnified here, because all our activities are so impressive in their vastness, he points out, as did Arnold, how this very vastness may bring to us the sense of our solemn responsibility to ourselves and to the world. But he is of the view that our political degradation, the lack of a "curb upon our lust of acquisition," and what he terms our "State blindness," are among the faults peculiar to ourselves. And, if it had been permitted to him to continue his investigation further, he would not have

failed to see startling evidences of our proneness to condone political transgression, the beneficiaries and even the perpetrators of which so often escape unrebuked.

By State blindness he does not mean a lack of patriotism in feeling or expression, but a disposition to look upon our activities and conduct as absolute things affecting only ourselves or our immediate surroundings, when, in fact, they must be looked at in their relation to the common good of the State. It will profit us to read without irritation, but with deep thoughtfulness, this startling statement, which a candid but friendly critic of us feels justified in making:

"Patriotism has become a mere national self-assertion, a sentimentality of flag-cheering with no constructive duties. Law, social justice, the pride and preservation of the State as a whole, are taken as provided for before the game began, and one devotes oneself to business. At business all men are held to be equal, and none is his brother's keeper."

To the catalogue of our dangers he adds our tolerance of, if not our sympathy with, the injustice of mere public clamor, a certain "flash of harshness" and an "accompanying contempt for abstract justice." He wishes, however, to regard this as an "accident of the commercial phase that presses men beyond dignity, patience and magnanimity," and is "loath to believe it is something fundamentally American." Yet, when he cites to our shame the instances of McQueen and Gorky, though he refrains from much injurious comment, he offers no excuse for our conduct.

He sees in the greedy acquisition of vast wealth and its vulgar display, and in the centralization and concentration of that wealth and of our organized industry within an increasingly few hands, more than the beginnings of the collapse of our much-vaunted individual competition and the equal opportunity for all. It is apparent to him that our economic process has begun to grind living men as well as inanimate matter. And he notes the ominous mutterings of a disapproval that will not be mute, even though it must speak with the economic jargon of the demagogue. It is no longer a case of our avoiding or stifling the debate, but of the substitution of wise counsels for intemperate utterance and for possibly intemperate acts; and by wise counsels is meant the introduction into our conceptions of our national life of many considerations we have up to the present time ignored.

All of us frequently hear expressions of surprise at the appearance of this disapproval at a time when the evidences of material prosperity confront us everywhere. Yet we must not forget that, fortunately, the American people think as well as eat; and it is a hopeful sign for the future that their consciences and intellects cannot be drugged with the "full dinner-pail."

By this it is not meant to suggest that all or even the larger part of this disapproval is justified. On the contrary, much of it is superficial or manufactured by men with evil or interested motives; much of it is full of crudities. Yet, when all this is said, it remains true that at the present time there is flowing through this and other lands a great stream of influence to which, accordingly as men view from different standpoints the contributions it has received from its many sources, they have applied the several names of "discontent," "unrest," "socialism," "humanitarianism" and "a great spiritual awakening." Whatever be its proper characterization, only our folly can persuade us that this influence in the world will, or that it is wise that it should, utterly disappear. On the contrary, if indications count for anything, it gains in depth and volume as it sweeps on, and threatens to undermine the foundation of many things whose security we have until now regarded as beyond menace. Nor, as some think, can its current be dammed; for through or over any obstruction placed in its way it is likely one day to rush with even more disastrous consequences. What appears to many of us, superficially viewed, merely as a meaningless or destructive agency, can be utilized for good; for, just as men by directing the course of mighty rivers into countless channels have turned deserts into fertile lands, so we, with this influence, can perhaps restore to usefulness the places in our national life laid waste by selfishness, neglect and the lack of regard for those things which concern the welfare of our neighbor and the State.

Mr. Wells does not write in despair of our future; and, despite our shortcomings, and despite his patriotic views of his own country, and his belief in the preeminence in certain directions of Germany, he inclines to the conviction that "the leadership of progress must remain with us"; and that if we fail, ours will not be an isolated failure, but a failure of the realization of great ideals of all the world, destined, as we are, perhaps, to express the final judgment of mankind as to the experiment of a democracy.

The doubts that existed in his mind, when he came to America, were largely resolved in our favor while he was in the midst of our excitement and rush and a part of our "step-lively" brigade, but back again in his study by the sea, where he writes the last, as he wrote the first portion of his book, his doubts recur, reinforced somewhat by later reflections.

He believes, however, that true friendship is shown to the American people not by concealing, but by indicating, the dangers that threaten us, which are many and conspicuous to the observer, who, by reflection and contemplation, sees them in their true perspective and proportions. We have not, as he points out, the problem confronting Great Britain, of holding together a vast and extended empire, and we are not, as are the other countries of Europe, to use his language, weighed down with the armor of war. In our legal entanglements, which perhaps he may emphasize too much—but in the other things he refers to that cannot be too much emphasized—in our persistent and reckless affirmation by word and deed that individualism is a thing to be worshipped; in our excessive devotion or yielding to the exacting demands of a material progress that precludes the continuous exercise of our highest intelligence and best thought; in our lack of appreciation that our acts have a relation other than to ourselves; in the absence among us of a social environment that enjoins a discipline of respect for a governing class or for some appropriate substitute, and of a national tradition that insists upon a high sense of responsibility to the State; and in our vast and irresponsible new immigration and in our colored population—in all these things he finds conditions requiring that the loins even of a great people like ours be girded up for a struggle in whose issue not only we, but all the world, have a momentous interest.

Perhaps, on the whole, it may be said that, with his passionate belief in an intelligence which insures the irresistible progress of mankind, his conclusions concerning us are not essentially different from those of Emerson, who—though he refers in plain speech to

"our great sensualism, our headlong devotion to trade, our extravagant confidence in our talent and activity, which becomes, whilst successful, a scornful materialism, but with the fault, of course, that it has no depth, no reserve force to fall back upon when a reverse comes,"

nevertheless believes that with us

"there is even an inspiration, God knows whence; a sudden undated perception of eternal right coming into and correcting things that were wrong, a perception that passes through thousands as readily as through one."

Nor are his conclusions essentially different from those of Arnold that, in the world at large,

"in spite of all that is said about the absorbing and brutalizing influence of passionate material progress, it seems to me that this progress is likely, though not certain, to lead in the end to an apparition of intellectual life."

Fortunately for our present safety, and for our future creative work in the world, we are, as Mr. Wells views us, feverish with desire for trustworthy information as to our whereabouts and true destination. Though he believes that we have drifted far from our true course, he realizes that our voyage has been over unknown seas, without the possession of the delicate instruments of tradition and contemplation for the taking of observations, and without beacons on the shore to warn us of dangers; and that, therefore, we have been obliged to cover great distances in our national life by mere dead-reckoning. But he does not wish to believe that we have yet made, or shall make, shipwreck of our own hopes and of the hopes of mankind.

Carlyle says of our harsh, cruel judgment of men who err:

"Granted, the ship comes into harbor with shrouds and tackle damaged; the pilot is blameworthy; he has not been all-wise and all-powerful; but to know *how* blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the globe or only to Ramsgate and the Isle of Dogs."

And Burns, on whose behalf he pleads, has said, in verse that is immortal:

"What's *done* we partly may compute,
But know not what's *resisted*."

So we who have the doubts, but also the hopes, of Mr. Wells wish to believe, and in large measure have persuaded ourselves to believe, that here in America, in the fulness of time, there will be reared that new State—with its realization of something akin to a perfected citizenship, with its *creed* of intelligence and with altars raised to the worship of great truths and of righteousness; where for offences against the standards of right conduct there shall be a swifter condemnation in the Court of Conscience

than there is punishment for violations of criminal statutes in the courts of law; and where to the imagination of men there shall rise in the midst of these harmonious surroundings not a dwarfed statue, but a noble and commanding monument to liberty, from whose lofty summit there shall, for us and all the world, shine forth with increasing splendor the light of a true civilization — that ideal State for which mankind has watched and prayed, and of whose certain coming Mr. Wells and other great authors, in their creative writings, have given prophetic utterance.

It will be difficult, indeed, for the American people to discharge the great debt of gratitude they owe to Mr. Wells.

JOSEPH S. AUERBACH.